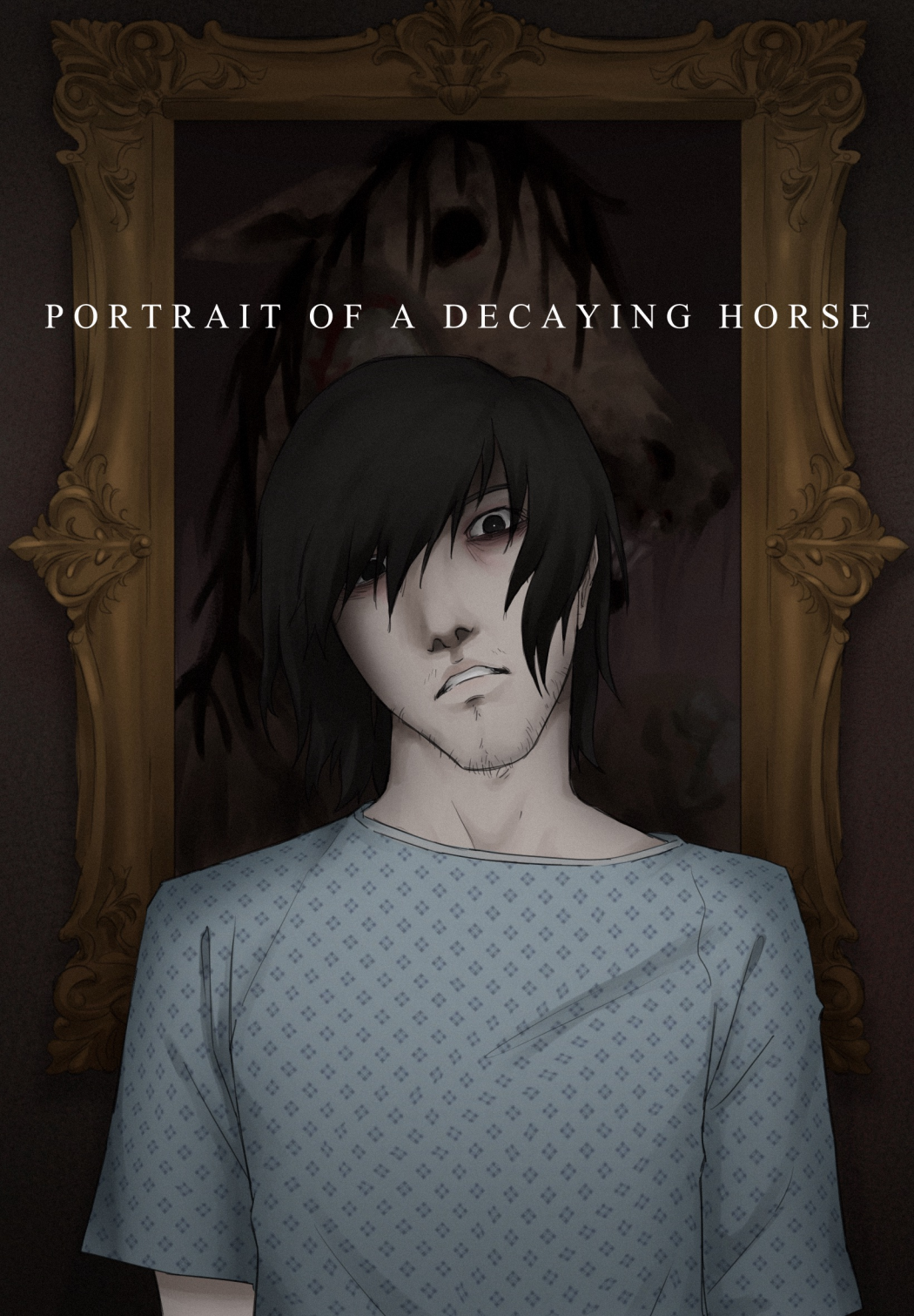
PORTRAIT OF A DECAYING HORSE

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LENZ-77 / Lennox Z.
2025

I awoke to a low humming and whirring of machines. It differed greatly from the ambience of the machines I worked with for the past three years which were obnoxious, loud, and ear-grating. They sang a quiet and steady lullaby as if they meant to lull me back to sleep. I opened my eyes to a white ceiling—one that was not of my bedroom or the drop-ceiling of the warehouse's break rooms, but a completely foreign one. With stiff joints, I sat up to look at my surroundings and I realized exactly where I was. This is not the first time I've woken up in a hospital, though I have never been in one as dreadful as this. Above me shone a fluorescent light with a plastic sky-patterned cover over it. It filled the surrounding area with its mockery, infecting every surface with a faint blue tinge. To my left, a monitor displayed my vitals and beeped a terrible song over the choir of droning machinery. I sat and stared at my body under the blanket. The noises became increasingly

unbearable; I wondered if I could shut the thing up by holding my breath, but it only slowed the sound down, so I forfeited and began breathing in the sterile air again. The sound of my heart being mimicked by the monitor's ugly voice infuriated me, but before I could rip out the devices from my body, somebody entered my field of vision.

"Cass?"

At the foot of the bed stood a familiar face. It was my co-worker, Elliott, who was in regular clothing; a new sight as I'd only ever seen him in work clothes. Soon followed a nurse in blue scrubs who held a clipboard and something else I couldn't recognize.

"Cass?" He waved a hand in front of me. "Hey, man! You feelin' alright?" I stared at him for a moment, trying to focus my hazy vision.

“Elliott… Why’m I…” My speech was slurred. I wanted to say, “Elliott, why am I here?”, but it wouldn’t come out. I stared at him some more, still trying to focus my vision, still failing. Suddenly, as if in a blink of an eye, his face began to morph and melt into one dark, putrid color that quickly spread to my entire vision. Frightened, I darted my eyes around desperate to make out some semblance of a person or object, which is when I saw a figure in front of me sat to my right, dressed in the same blue scrubs the nurse had worn. It looked back at me with a disgusting smile. Holding up a clipboard and pen, the figure began writing something. I could still hear the persistent sound of the monitor, and accompanied by the scratching of the pen, it rang an infuriating noise through my head. I leapt from the bed and ripped the clipboard from the figure’s hands. The pen hit the floor and echoed horribly loud, overwhelming my senses which only angered me further. I looked at the clipboard to see just

what the hell the thing wrote, and on a single sheet of paper it read in large, sloppy handwriting: “Hong, Cassius: Male. 27 years. 64 inches. 141 pounds. Diagnosis: Brain tumor, Grade 2. Shame.” The word “shame” was continually written down and across the page. I tossed the clipboard to the floor—or whatever it was beneath my feet—which echoed an even louder and more terrible sound.

“Cassius,” the figure began to speak. “Cassius, are you proud?”

“What… the hell’s that s’posed t’mean…?” I once again slurred my words, and once again, I failed. The figure extended a limb towards me. “Follow,” is all it said before my surroundings suddenly changed. The figure vanished and I was engulfed by a scene of the city. It looked and felt familiar, yet everything was off. Windows and structures blended together as if they were made of paint and flesh, and the road pulsated to the

sound of the monitor. That's right—I could still hear the monitor, somehow. I began to move my body, walking down the sidewalk beside the breathing road as things that resembled people moved past me.

A brain tumor. Now that I think about it, it all makes sense: The vertigo, nausea, headaches, photosensitivity, my increasing irritability and anxiety, everything, this explains everything. Since last year, everything had begun to lose sense. I began treating everybody with incredible apathy and rudeness. Everything felt so distant, and at times, I felt a total loss of control over my body. If I had died a year ago and this was an afterlife, I doubt anything in the real world would have changed. I can hardly recount anything—things that occurred within the past week, the past month, the past year, across my lifetime—I never owned much, but the one thing that truly belonged to me slipped further and further from my grasp. I'd blamed it all on

myself and my illness for I had been sick in the head since I was young; I convinced myself I'd gone mad from my own faults and that I am finally paying penance, but I am now aware this was a sabotage orchestrated by none other than my own body.

As my mind was lost in thought, I noticed the scene around me had changed again. I was now in the warehouse; the place where I spend most of my waking hours, surrounded by racks, pallets, and boxes. Straight in front of me stood a yellow scissor lift, and on the platform was… me. I saw myself, dressed exactly how I was before waking up here. It was the clearest image I'd seen since waking. As I stared at the man, the lift began to rise. The lift stopped at the second tier of the rack, and suddenly, he became stiff and collapsed. I watched him jerk and writhe on the platform for several moments. Though it was strange and surreal to see myself with such visual clarity, I found the sight rather entertaining and even a little humorous. The

image of me, seizing and struggling, presented an image that no other man would ever be able to see in his lifetime. That is when I realized this tumor may just be a blessing in disguise. All throughout my life, I had wished for something new, something to break the monotony of my life, and this, this must be it. This is what has come to fill the chasm in my soul—the one that has come to my rescue—a beautiful cancer, a fissure in the cells and a glittering cave within.

The monitor continued to beep. After such revelations, its sound no longer irritated me. It began to sound more musical rather than like an obnoxious machine. I had listened so closely to the song of the monitor that I hadn't realized the scene before me shifted, and I was in what seemed to be a dim, perhaps romantically lit motel room. White wax candles lined the floor, illuminating the room with flickering candlelight. Above the shoddy bed hung a large portrait of a decaying horse in an ornate

gold-colored frame, and in some strange way, I felt as if it were painted after my likeness. It contrasted heavily from the rest of the dreary, dismal room which appeared to be unclean and in disrepair. Looking down upon the bed, I gazed upon a promiscuously-dressed woman laid in an alluring position. She looked into my eyes and I stared back. I couldn't help but notice her striking beauty; her eyes were wide and green, glistening among the candle flames. She was tall—significantly taller than any other woman I'd ever seen, and definitely taller than me. Her skin was dull in color and flayed in many areas across her body, revealing the layers of flesh, fat, muscle, and bone underneath, but no blood. Some parts of her seemed as if they were slowly melting—not in the same way I'd seen Elliott's face melt into a sea of color, but in the way flesh appears to melt when it decomposes. I approached closer and extended a hand to touch her leg. It was sickly, pale, and cold to the touch. Her eyes

remained focused on me as I carefully lowered myself onto the bed, positioning myself over her. That is when I noticed she had a foul smell; it was that of decay and formaldehyde, and the smell stung my nose in the most wonderful way. I drew my face closer to hers and we simply gazed into each other's eyes. As I ran my fingers through her long, coarse, dark hair, she let out a soft giggle.

"Cassie," she said. "I've been waiting forever. I've wanted to see you for so, so long…"

Her voice was low and raspy. She spoke with wonderful cadence, and upon hearing her voice, I immediately knew I wanted more of it.

"Wha's… your name…?"

She giggled again. "What do *you* want my name to be, Cassie?"

Her foul breath spread like perfume in the warm air and only made me want to draw in even closer. I thought for a moment about what I wanted her name to be.

“E… Evelyn.”

“Evelyn?” She repeated.

“Yeah.”

A smile spread across Evelyn’s face. “Sounds pretty,” she said. I smiled back.

The candlelight grew brighter and a sharp burning smell filled the room. I pulled back and looked around to see the wallpaper had been lit on fire. It was quickly spreading, engulfing the dingy room in flames. Before I could say anything to Evelyn, she pulled me back down into an embrace. Her cold skin almost felt warm. I lay my head against her pulseless chest as she softly caressed my head.

“Th’room… s’on fire, Ev’lyn…”

“I know, Cassie. It’s okay.”

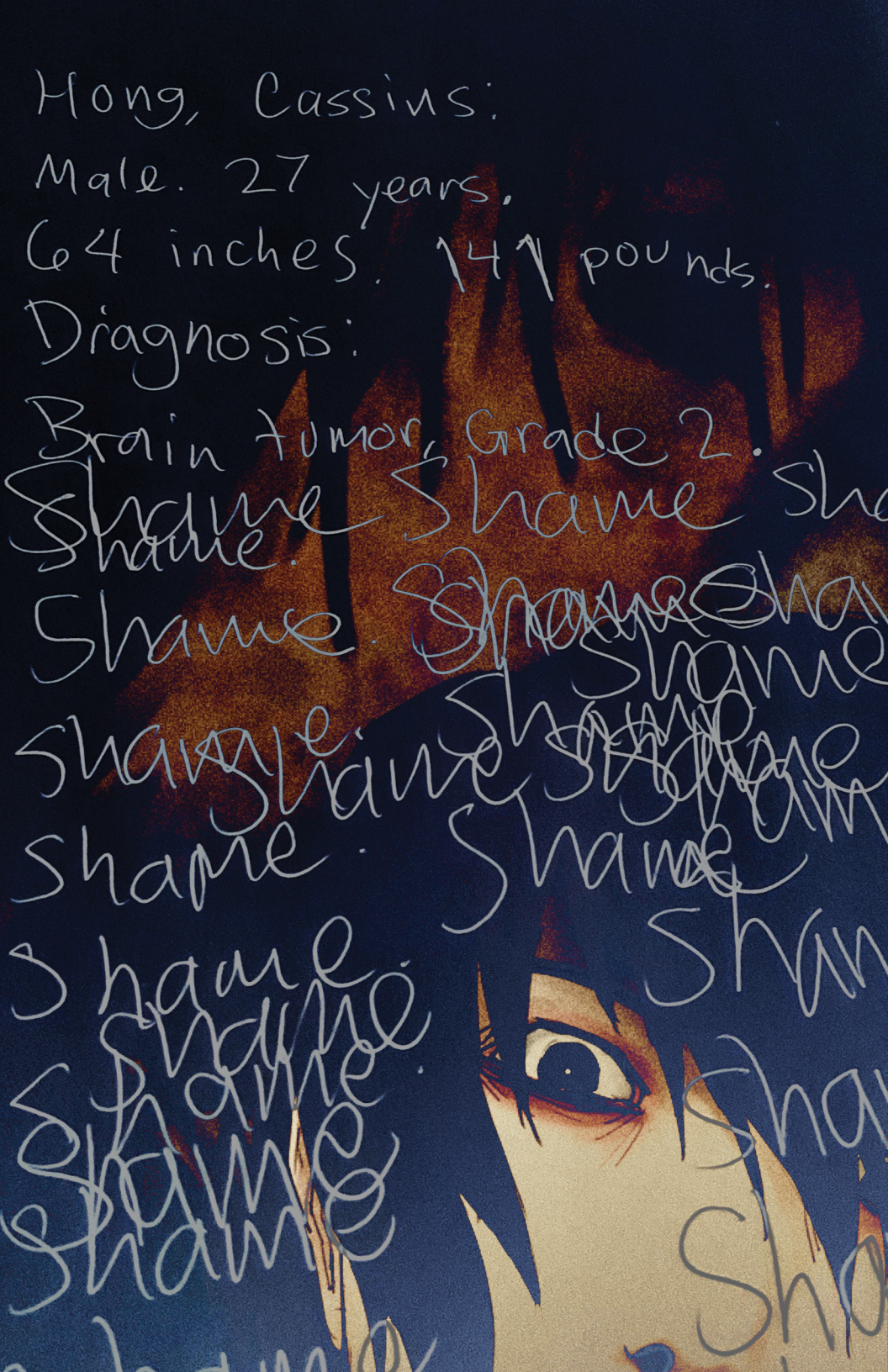
The combination of Evelyn’s rotten fragrance, the burning room, and the hot air had an intoxicating effect on me, if Evelyn herself did not already make me wonder if I were dreaming. Her arms were firm, my body was still. As thick smoke filled the room, it entered my lungs and my breaths became shorter and shorter. I slowly shut my eyes and took it all in, sinking deeper into Evelyn’s embrace. For once in my shameful life, somebody, somebody who hadn’t acted out of pity, somebody who hadn’t settled for less, wanted me. I had always expected I’d die alone without ever feeling the touch or embrace of a woman, or any individual who desired me for that matter. Unlike my peers, I had never cared so much for sex or shallow pleasure, but instead, I had a simple desire to be wanted. Movies and locker room talk spewed shallow ideas of “love” to me as a boy and

never could I understand any of it; even as an adult, even right now as I lay with Evelyn. I had never been able to attract a woman, and God knows I never had the money or courage to hire an escort. I had never truly worked towards becoming an "ideal man", and even if I'd tried to, such a feat would be impossible for me for I have been a short and small-framed man my entire life, and working for hours in a warehouse every day did nothing to change that. A blue-collar job never hardened me or made me more of a man in their eyes—in fact, it has probably proven my frailty to everybody around me and I was almost desperate enough to revel in their pity.

Circles. Pacing around and around in circles is what my life is and always has been. Hoping for a change, begging, praying for something to snap me out of the cruel reality I have been forced into. I have finally achieved the happy ending I'd always desired. No longer will I waste my days away trying to imagine

a better outcome—I am sated. With a body of weakness and carbon monoxide, I looked up to see Evelyn's eyes one last time and she remained a warm, loving gaze as the horse's portrait burned before us. I shut my eyes once more, and heat swallowed me as the monitor's cries rang through the air before its song ceased.

Hong, Cassius.
Male. 27 years.
64 inches. 141 pounds.
Diagnosis:
Brain tumor, Grade 2.


Shame
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